

Joel Rayburn: I want to welcome those who are watching today to here to what is an inaugural video event of the American Center for Levant Studies. A little more on that in a moment. I'm Joel RAEBURN. I'm the director of the American Center for Law Studies and also former US government official in in different capacities. I'm joined here today by Dr. Michael Duran, who is a senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, which is a research organization here in Washington, DC. And Dr. Duran is also a member of the board of directors of the American Center for Levant Studies. So a little bit about this initiative. What is the American Center for Levant Studies? It's a research organization that is going to pay close attention to the Levant region, by which we mean historically the Levant. We mean the region of the Middle East, which borders the Mediterranean Sea or is in its hinterland. What our focus is going to be.

Mike Doran: Syria, Lebanon, Syria, historically Palestine, Israel.

Joel Rayburn: Syria, Lebanon. What's now Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, but with the reach into the regions around it. So I think that Iraq at times historically has been facing to the Levant and obviously the ties there are huge. So our focus will be we will start with that region, which is a vital.

Mike Doran: So basically the place between the Arabian Gulf and Turkey.

Joel Rayburn: Correct, north, south and arrangement in the Mediterranean between the Mediterranean Sea and the Zagros Mountains, the Iranian frontier. That's that's the area that we will that we'll start focusing on. But of course, there's there's a region around that. There are pillar states of the region surrounding it. So we'll need to be able to explain how this region interacts with in such a vital way. Egypt. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the other states of the of the Arabian Peninsula. So really, we're talking about a region that's at the its the heart of the Middle East, part of the classical Middle East. That's going to be that's going to be the focus. Now, the mission of the research mission of the organization is to try to help people here in the United States who are in official roles, not in official roles, have a better understanding of what's happening in the region and how it affects United States interests, how it affects American interests, how it affects the broader world. At the same time, we want to try to interpret what's happening here in Washington for our friends and the public in that region, in the region.

Mike Doran: To bring their insights to Washington and an understanding of Washington to.

Joel Rayburn: Them. Absolutely. And the reason for that and the and the thing that I mean, this is something you and I have been talking about for a long time, is that there we see over and over again that there's a gap in mutual understanding. We have a lot of interaction, especially when we were in government. We have a lot of interaction with friends and observers in the Middle East for whom the way in which American policy is formulated is just a black box. They just don't understand it. I mean, there are many Americans for whom that's true as well. And I've been in that number myself from time to time. But what we see is very sophisticated, very sophisticated governments and other non-government observers in the Middle East often are perplexed by how Washington decides what to do or what not to do or how it prioritizes. And it can be a mystery.

Mike Doran: Let me let me suggest something to you. I'd love to get your view on this. We've talked about this a lot, but I don't know if I ever put it to you this way. I think more often than not, certainly with regard to Syria, there's there is no the United States never has a Syria policy. It has it has an Israel policy or an Israeli-Palestinian policy. It has a it has an Iran policy. During the Iraq war, it had an Iraq war policy, but Syria was always an afterthought. That's what I found when I worked in the White House. It was always an afterthought. And in recent years, I think it became the struggle over the Assad regime. It really became the primary arena in which the new order in the Middle East was going to be decided. And for America, it was still an afterthought. And that's it's very hard to get it up to a level of sustained senior leader attention. You'd rather that as our envoy.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah. Yeah, that's true. You're right. Because I did serve as the as the US special envoy for Syria for a time. You're absolutely right. And it's indicative of of it's indicative of the tendency in Washington to pick out sort of narrow issues in a region, certainly in the Middle East. I'm sure this is true. I've seen that you can see this in other regions as well, and then wind up missing the forest for the trees because in the service of a particular policy goal or a particular policy issue, you what we wind up doing in the United States more often than not is subordinating broad, bigger issues to that particular stick. So, for example, I mean, a big one is counterterrorism. Now, counterterrorism is

very important, but counterterrorism, when counterterrorism becomes the ordering principle of your policy for an entire region, then you wind up missing other big things they happen, such as state based.

Mike Doran: One of the biggest mistakes that we made and I think in the post 911 world was raising counterterrorism up to a strategic level. A counterterrorism should be more tactical. But it's funny because those those guys I mean, the the vast bureaucracy that we created to counterterrorism, they had two things going for them in the policy debate that was were always winners. One is they knew what they wanted to do. They had a very clear agenda. We want to go whack this guy. We want to we want to we want to work with this group against that group. And they had great certainty about it. And secondly, they were a domestic priority as well as a foreign policy priority. So they were always going to get the attention of the president in a way that, you know, people like you and me are having to say, you know, sir, everything in the Middle East is connected to everything else. You have to have a holistic policy. You can't just be focused on one issue, where are you going to go wrong? So that's it's very abstract. It's very abstract. But if you come in to the president, you say, Sir, there's a terrorist out there. We have to whack them. That's going to get attention.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. So counterterrorism is one of those is one of those issues. The other thing about counterterrorism is that because it is it gets so operational. That that it's very easy to for it to become disconnected to a broader political strategy. Right. And and what you wind up doing. So you can be very successful in the execution of a counterterrorism campaign and yet be losing the geopolitical contest that that a against which the counterterrorism, the terrorism and the counterterrorism are happening. Right. And what you want. So I did feel in the Iraq conflict and then in the Syria conflict and I'm sure that's true elsewhere, that we were extremely good at carrying out operations. We were extremely good at our tactics, yet we were never really gaining against the phenomenon of terrorism, because the phenomenon of terrorism was driven by a political struggle, but by a political contest.

Mike Doran: Well, we never had a we never had a picture or let me be a little bit more accurate. We never had the correct picture, I would say, of of what the post-conflict political order should look like, because that's what we should have been building. You use the conflict to build the order. And to the extent that there was a vision of the order,

I do believe that Obama had a vision of the order. The problem with it is it was based on cooperation with Russia and Iran and building a system, a concert system with the Russians and the Iranians. We could argue about that. I don't know if you want to argue about that, but that and then the counter Obama people just had just had specific issues on which they strongly disagreed with Obama like the JCPOA, but they didn't have a vision of the of the alternative political order.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, I think this is true. And this is one of the reasons why I just felt the need to try to create a center like this is to try to identify emerging trends to and to try to define what is an ongoing regional conflict, a military conflict in many ways, but is also a struggle to try to shape the future political order of this entire region, not just the Levant region, which is massive in its own right, but the surrounding region, which taken together, has a collective population of almost half a billion people and is growing fast.

Mike Doran: Half a.

Joel Rayburn: Billion, half a billion people and is growing. If you think about Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen and then the countries of the classical Levant, we're talking about an enormous, enormous populations, potentially enormous economies, enormous natural resources, gas, oil.

Mike Doran: Center of the global.

Joel Rayburn: Energy market and center of the global energy market, but also a region that is that has in it three of the world's strategic waterways that the global economy requires, global commerce requires. You think about the global in a in a digital age, you don't really think about the physical the the physical attributes of the global economy. But this is a region that has Suez Canal, the the Strait of Hormuz and the Babel, Mandeb. And these are three waterways on which the economic relationship between Europe and Asia depend on, which the energy relationship between Europe and the energy producers of the Gulf and the Far East and the Gulf and so on. So I say this as a segue I want to get to, because I'd like to ask you, to my mind, it means that this is a region that the United States simply cannot ignore, that neglect or even benign neglect will not work because a region that is a region of that kind with with these qualities, other powers, some good, some not good, are going to recognize the vital

interests there, and they're going to be in there and competing for influence and trying to control it, shape it, etc.. So there are reasons. Go ahead. No, I was just going to say, do you and don't you I mean this to my mind, this is why it's a major reason why the idea of pivoting from the Middle East to somewhere else has never made sense to me.

Mike Doran: I think it's crazy. I think it's insane, actually, because, I mean, the argument is the argument is that the the centerpiece of US foreign policy today is the contest with China. The. These wars in the Middle East are sapping our strength and distracting us from the main show, which is China. And that's what we so we need to get out of the Middle East and focus on China. But the contest with China is comprehensive. It goes. The Chinese want to revise the whole international order. And China is heavily dependent on oil and liquefied natural gas that either come comes from the Middle East or transits through it from Africa and Europe through the through the Suez Canal and are and so are all of China's rivals in Asia, including India, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Australia. So right now, the US military primacy in the Middle East means that China's supply lines are vulnerable to the United States. And if if the US picks up and leaves and China fills the vacuum, then China's supply lines will be secure and all of its rivals will. China will have its thumb on the windpipe of all of its of all of its rivals.

Mike Doran: And the fact that we have the ability that the American military has the ability to shut off their energy supplies is the greatest non, non military or let's say, indirect military deterrent to an attack on Taiwan that we have. Xi Jinping knows his energy supplies are vulnerable. He's going to think twice about attacking Taiwan because of that. So if we pick up and leave, we we we we increase the chance of him attacking Taiwan, but also we're going to let him then we're going to let China own the global the global energy market. He'll use that to dominate industry. He'll use it to become the dominant player in all of Eurasia. And it's very it's very obvious that, I mean, only people in the United States, it's weird. There's a lot of people in the United States seem to have moved. You kind of suggested this into a nonphysical world where somehow we live in a world now where we have coffee shops and and iPhones and big thoughts and all the all the physical attributes of the world don't matter anymore.

Joel Rayburn: That's just insane, right? The metaverse.

Mike Doran: The metaverse? Yeah. We live in the metaverse. We don't have to worry about about about oil and gas and so on.

Joel Rayburn: Right. So, I mean, really, what we're saying is that the Carter Doctrine, which was formulated out of the realization in the 1970s that the the energy producing region of the Middle East was too important for the United States to allow a hostile power to dominate it or control it. It was too important. It's still in it's still valid.

Mike Doran: It should be. It should be. We moved away from it.

Joel Rayburn: I mean.

Mike Doran: But I don't know that the world out there in the metaverse knows what the what the Carter Doctrine.

Joel Rayburn: So the Carter Doctrine was the Carter Doctrine was the policy toward the Middle East, formulated by President Jimmy Carter during his administration in the late 1970s after having gone through the energy shock, the oil shock of the 1970s, and even on up to 1977, 78, 79, and then seeing potential competitors begin to encroach on that region and try to dominate it, such as and that was it was taken this this is a policy that was formulated against the backdrop of the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan, of the Iranian revolution, overturning the Shah and shaking what had been a pillar of American of an American alliance in that region. And so that led president.

Mike Doran: And also the the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca to.

Joel Rayburn: Take over the Grand Mosque in Mecca. There were a lot of things that happened during that window.

Mike Doran: That was the moment that. Sorry, if I may, none, please. No, it's interesting because now, now that I think about it. That was the moment that the Middle East that we now know was born. I mean, you had the Middle East of the Cold War into two separate camps. Suddenly we had we had the we had the Iranian revolution. So Iran isn't in the American camp or the Soviet camp then. And then we had also the terrorism question with the instability and the potential instability in Saudi Arabia. And

then you have the the birth of the shortly thereafter of the of what became CENTCOM. Right. Right. What was the rapid reaction?

Joel Rayburn: Rapid reaction force. That's right. Which was being born at about the same time that al Qaeda was being.

Mike Doran: Yeah. So that's the the world that we now know. That's the that's the birth of it. Can I say one other thing? Of course. I think it's interesting because Carter came into office and he gave this speech at Notre Dame saying that we shouldn't have an inordinate fear of communism. In other words, the problem, even even though we associate Richard Nixon with detente from the from the point of view of the left back then, Richard Nixon was and the right was too interested in the Cold War. And we could actually we could take detente further and actually work with the Russians to stabilize the Middle East. That was the idea. Right, Right. That was the idea. We were going to have the we were going to have a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict working together with the Russians and so on. And then all of a sudden the Russians go into Afghanistan and he has these other problems. And he realizes that that the United States has to basically say the United States will not tolerate any any power. You said an outside power. I think the Carter Doctrine says an outside power toward the Soviet Union. But they don't want any single hostile power to be to dominate the Persian Gulf. And that has to be our policy today. We cannot let the Russians, I mean, the Iranians or the Chinese, together with the Iranians or China, Russia, Iran, dominate the Gulf.

Joel Rayburn: And it's interesting because what it what I have seen unfold while I was a government official, military officer.

Mike Doran: And a.

Joel Rayburn: Diplomat was it looked to me and it certainly looked to people in the region as though the Iranian regime had a conscious strategy of trying to reach across the northern Middle East from across the Iraq and the Levant and establish an axis of control underpinned by a military footprint from Iran, reach out to the Mediterranean Sea, and then have essentially a control of that axis, East-West axis, and then be able to interrupt or control throttle or control the natural relationship, economic and political

and military between Europe and the Gulf. They want to sit astride this north south relationship between Europe and Turkey as well, and the energy producers of the Gulf.

Mike Doran: And, you know, they're sorry, man.

Joel Rayburn: And I was just going to say and and so they want to militarily dominate the Strait of Hormuz through the Houthis. They want to try to militarily dominate, if they choose to, the Baba Mandeb. And by having a presence on the Mediterranean, they now have the Suez Canal potentially under their military domination as well. And so I to my mind, the Iranian regime has a conscious strategy which is which should kick in the Carter Doctrine.

Mike Doran: Totally. Absolutely. I agree 100%. And I'll just add one more dimension to it, to the picture you just drew. As we're talking today, we're talking on on Monday, October 24. On Monday, October 24, the. There's a severe tension between the Azerbaijanis and the Iranians, and that's because there's a possibility of opening a corridor from Central Asia across to across Europe.

Joel Rayburn: Which would outflank this Iranian reach across the northern Middle East.

Mike Doran: And they would have great energy supplies of Central Asia going to Europe without going through Iran or and Iran and Russia have a have a have a joint interest in blocking and blocking that. So I think our we've got the essence of a few strategic principles right here in what we've just said, number one. Syria. The centrality of Syria is with the bloc. It should be a principle of American foreign policy that basically we teach Iran geography. Syria. Not Iran. Iran. Iran. Syria. Not Iran. Yemen. Not Iran, but Syria. Not Iran. And we want to block. Iran should not be a player in the Levant. It should not be it should not be a major player in the Levant. Of course it is with Hezbollah and the Assad regime. But it should be a goal. Our goal should be to diminish, to diminish that, and our goal should be to open up the routes that Iran doesn't control.

Joel Rayburn: Well, secondarily, I mean, as a corollary to that, as there's been this Iranian regime grab across the northern Middle East and essentially a grab across the

northern Middle East and then a flanking down to Yemen. So it's as though it's a pincer movement of the Iranian regime, militarily speaking, around the northern Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. Vladimir Putin's Russia has been helping to facilitate that. And they they because they're in a they're in a strategic alliance with the Iranian regime. So it looks to me like Russia has has an interest in helping this happen and benefit and partnering essentially with the Iranians.

Mike Doran: You'd put China in there, too, wouldn't you?

Joel Rayburn: And China. China as well. It's just that the Russians, militarily speaking in a in a I would say in a more hard power way.

Mike Doran: Right. Especially in Syria where they're in an alliance.

Joel Rayburn: And you see the flip side, the converse of that, of course, the comeback to that is that the Iranian regime now is is projecting hard power on behalf of the Russians into Europe.

Mike Doran: Ukraine. Isn't that amazing? The the Iranians didn't hesitate, didn't hesitate to rush to give drones to Russia.

Joel Rayburn: They didn't fear escalation.

Mike Doran: They didn't fear escalation. But we we have not given the Ukrainians the drone equivalent, which is at our disposal.

Joel Rayburn: The now and part of that. So this gets on to the fact that we lay out a situation, as you and I see it, and I think a lot of other people see it. And I think let's say I think people with a working memory of the Cold War see it because so much of what we're. Talking about now is these were the dynamics of.

Mike Doran: The Gulf, the basics, the.

Joel Rayburn: Cold War. So if you if you have a living memory or an adult living memory of the Cold War, a lot of this, you know, your your your basis for assessing

these dynamics is already there. But we have a we have a tendency there's a natural tendency in the United States to sort of revert to strategic isolationism. Which is understandable. I mean, this is a strain throughout American history because.

Mike Doran: We're pretty far away from because.

Joel Rayburn: We're far away from it, where we have we're flanked by two oceans on east and west. On north and south, we have benign states, benign, non-threatening, essentially client states. And so there's a sense in the United States from among a lot of people that we can just sort of pull up the drawbridge. We don't have a vital interest in those places over there. So where does that come from? Beyond the geography of it, where does that come from? The the isolation is strange because what we find is it's not really it's this is not a thing on the political left or the political right. It's on both the political left and the.

Mike Doran: Yeah, in different in different forms. Well, I think like you said, it it comes out of our history for sure. But also at this moment, we're highly polarized at home. And a lot of the discussion of foreign policy today is really just domestic politics in another language. And it's just that people map their domestic political goals onto the foreign policy. On foreign policy debate, I find you both you you served in the Trump administration. I was highly sympathetic to it and. But I find now I lost all my anti Trump friends when I became sympathetic to the Trump administration. And now I find myself having tension with my Trump friends because I support the the war in Ukraine, because I think we have to stop Russian imperialism. And but I hear a lot of the a lot of the discussion of Ukraine, the emphasis on I'm talking about in the American domestic context and this is on the Nazism among the supposed Nazis, among the Ukrainians, fear of World War three, of the nuclear war and so on, discussion of the corruption of the Ukrainians and so on. None of these things are should be sneezed at, but I think it's being built up quite a bit because there is an opposition to any any any on the one hand, any initiative from the Biden administration, especially one with respect to Ukraine, which the the. The Democrats use the Ukraine as a pretext to to impeach Trump. So Ukraine is already in people's minds as as the instrument by which the by which the global left works against the nationalists in the United States.

Joel Rayburn: I mean, to my mind, the the the lesson of the major events of the 20th century for the United States. It was that we had to learn. Four times that we have to care about what happens on the other end of the oceans.

Mike Doran: Four times World War One, World War two.

Joel Rayburn: Cold War, Cold War. And then just nine months into the 21st century. 911. Okay. So we actually we we can't we can't neglect what happens on the other end of the ocean. I mean, this is the this is what's driving the policy toward China now. Good. Thankfully, I mean, it's overdue, but we really we have an interest in who in the nature of of Europe and who dominates Europe. We have an interest in the Middle East. I mean, this is Shun, because if if we neglect that interest, then we want then there are threats that emerge lash out at.

Mike Doran: I truly not just threats. You know, I truly believe with with no hyperbole, that that the defence of American freedom is wrapped up in the defense of the Middle East. And the reason is, I think that China is a is a threat to American freedom in the way that the Soviet and the way the Soviet Union was. You only need to see the way the Chinese have tried to strong arm the the, the Australians and the Canadians and how successfully they they were, I mean to a certain extent and strong arm in the before people woke up and saw how they had insinuated themselves into into Australian and Canadian society, they've insinuated themselves into our society, they have our, our universities are dependent on them, our media is kowtowing to them and you can see that they can that if they own the global energy markets, they're going to have an enormous amount of power with which to to start shutting down free speech in the United States.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah. Mean, and it's almost as though our attitude toward both China and Russia after 1989 was that, well, these are friends in waiting. Yeah.

Mike Doran: We're into.

Joel Rayburn: Yes.

Mike Doran: Our friend and waiting.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah.

Mike Doran: We just need the three our friend, the right formula and we'll.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah. When, when I mean that may be true someday but, but what we're seeing right now is revanchism from those three powers on, on revisionist power.

Mike Doran: On that note, can I, can I make an observation that I think is very interesting about the current moment. I think it's really interesting right now how weak Russia and Iran are.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah.

Mike Doran: I mean the the the fragility of the Iranian regime as a result of these protests is there for everyone to see. I mean, it's like a porcupine. It has these missiles and drones and I don't mean to and this nuclear program and I don't mean to minimize that. That's those are serious military threats. But that's all there is. There there's there's the the the the basis of support for the regime in Iran is incredibly weak. There are schoolgirls that are going out and and shaking the foundations of the of the thing. We should we should take that to heart.

Joel Rayburn: Well, let's let's let me use that to segue into something that I wanted to get your thoughts on and offer some comments of my own, which is because there are several major developments taking place almost, I would say, on a world historical scale. What we're seeing in happen in Ukraine is it's the exposure of Russian weakness. More than that, it's it's as though it's the collapse of Russian power projection. We now see that Russia simply does not have the strength to project power outside its borders in the way that for the last 20 years we've assumed that they do.

Mike Doran: Amazing.

Joel Rayburn: What does that mean for the direction of US policy? And we're seeing what it means for the direction of US policy in Europe. It has revived the US relationship with the NATO countries and with the Eastern European, the eastern tier of

NATO's and so on in a very in a very real way. But what does it mean for. What does it mean for the Middle East? What does it mean for what? For the United States?

Mike Doran: I'm going to answer that. I want to throw out one other thought just very quickly, and maybe we don't even need to talk about it, but we just had over the weekend. This incredible scene at the Communist Party conference in Beijing of Xi Jinping having Hu.

Joel Rayburn: Jintao.

Mike Doran: Having Hu Jintao, Hu Jintao.

Joel Rayburn: Ejected from.

Mike Doran: Hu Jintao, 80 years old, a threat to no one, I'm assuming ejected. On the one hand, you can look at that as a sign of strength and but it looks to me like a sign of weakness. And I just I just throw that out. I'm not sure. Well, I'm not I'm not a China expert. And I don't I'm very interested to hear how people are going to interpret this. But but the fact that he is insecure about Hu Jintao or feels the need to show the world that he can crush Hu Jintao, that doesn't that doesn't to me, I don't I don't hear strength when I when I don't see strength, when I when I see that.

Joel Rayburn: Spectacle, I'm not equipped to interpret it myself because I am not an expert on China. What it looked like to many, many of my Middle Eastern.

Mike Doran: Friends.

Joel Rayburn: Was.

Mike Doran: Saddam Hussein, said.

Joel Rayburn: Saddam Hussein. I remember that at the Baath Party Congress in 1979, sitting on the stage smoking a cigar, talking about conspiracies and having had a list of people removed from the audience one by one. You know.

Mike Doran: By the way, that's an incredible video. I don't want this digression, but but that is an incredible video, As I remember. He's got smoking a cigar, he's got a list, and they're taking them out one by one. And at one point he dabs a tear from his eye because he's so sad that these guys are being shot in the room next door.

Joel Rayburn: And and there's a spontaneous reaction from the rest of the audience, people standing up and saying, yes, Saddam, you're doing the right thing.

Mike Doran: Don't kill me. Don't kill.

Joel Rayburn: Me. Yeah, don't let them come for me. So but.

Mike Doran: In after.

Joel Rayburn: Your Russia because recently because Russia has attempted to use its foothold in Syria.

Mike Doran: Just.

Joel Rayburn: To to insinuate itself back into the Middle East security system and essentially just the Middle East so large for the first time since 1973.

Mike Doran: For those for those people who know how I see the world, I'm going to sound like a broken record. But to me, this screams the importance of Turkey, because there's a there's a direct connection between Ukraine and Syria. There's the the Russian position in the eastern Mediterranean is based on Sevastopol in Crimea. If he loses Crimea, it's not clear that he will he Putin But if Putin loses, loses Crimea, his he's weakened enormously in Syria enormously. Maybe he may even be through in Syria. And Syria is the base from which he moved on to Libya as well. So so Russia as an eastern Mediterranean power is at stake in this in this war. And he could potentially lose, lose everything. He's going to be weakened no matter what. And that. That to me is the key background to understanding some of the things that we've seen lately, such as the move toward normalization with the Assad regime by Turkey. Also at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting a few weeks ago in Samarkand, I think it

was there was a picture of of Erdogan walking hand in hand with Putin. And the the opponents of Turkey or critics of Turkey said, aha, see, he's an ally of Putin.

Mike Doran: I think they misread that picture entirely. That was basically the equivalent of Putin putting his arm around the way we're son or wayward nephew and trying to lead him to the right path. What I'm trying to say is Turkey senses the the weakness of of Russia. It understands that Russia's weakness is its opportunity. It's normalizing with Assad because it wants to free up it because the United States is working to push everyone to normalize with Assad anyway, quietly. The Biden administration is is is is not opposed to it. Let's say that. And Turkey wants to be in the game. But the goal is for the Turks, the key is their their contest with the PKK in Syria. They want to change the balance in Syria so it's more favorable to them. And I think this is going to lead and we're already seeing this not just to not just to an attempt to shift the balance with Russia somewhat in Syria in favor of the Turks. It's also leading to it's also leading to increasing friction between Turkey and Iran. And that's part of what we're seeing in Azerbaijan right now today while we're speaking.

Joel Rayburn: Well. So I don't want to make I don't want to go into too much detail on Syria today because I want to I want to keep it broad. But I will say this is one area where I'm I'm more skeptical than you. I don't actually think that Turkey will normalize relations with the Assad regime. I don't think it's possible. No. Sorry.

Mike Doran: Sorry. I didn't I'm sorry to interrupt you. I, I just know that among the among the Syrians, there's fear of that.

Joel Rayburn: Yes.

Mike Doran: And I think the I think the the the I was actually trying to say the opposite. Don't be too worried about that, that there's movement in that direction from the Turks. But it's just it's it's to be understood. Against the background of their of their ongoing. Ongoing competition with the Russians and the Iranians.

Joel Rayburn: The. Can I. Can I switch gears a little bit to. Can I. Can I switch gears a little bit and get your thoughts on the uprising and and the protest movement in Iran right now? Protest movement in Iran. And let me let me just throw out a couple of

thoughts. Ali Khamenei is the dictator of Iran. He's been in power for 33 years. And he was really in the top tier of the regime for eight years before that. So the guy has been at or he's been in charge of or near in charge of the Islamic Republic since 1981. That system has never known another dictator, certainly in its living memory. If you think about it. So for 33 years, he's been the guy who selects commanders, promotes senior regime officials. He is. And all the strands of power he's brought to himself. He's eliminated rivals one by one. So this is very it's a personal dictatorship regime. It's just he's played a he's played a great trick on the world by not having his name associated with in the way that, for example, Castro.

Mike Doran: Or Assad.

Joel Rayburn: Or asset.

Mike Doran: Write Saddam Hussein.

Joel Rayburn: Correct. But he's every every bit a dictator. And it's very much personalized rule there. And I don't think anyone knows what will happen to that system when he's gone in the same way that when Tito died over time, Yugoslavia immediately began to unravel. And until about eight years later, it was really in the throes of violent collapse. And so it's very interesting to me that that there is a broad popular rejection of his system and his rule at precisely the time that that he's not well. Right. And he's 80 turned 84 this year, I think.

Mike Doran: And you can tell I can tell by your analysis.

Joel Rayburn: There's an end date. You're an.

Mike Doran: Historian. Yeah. Because you can see like 20 or 30 years from now, when they write it in the history books, that's exactly what they're going to focus in on. Right. Simultaneous crisis uprising and basically a succession crisis going on.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, but I mean, do you see it similarly or am I what? What else is going on?

Mike Doran: No, I completely see it similarly. And I've been asking everyone that I think really has an understanding of what's going on on the ground in Iran. I'm obviously not that guy. I don't speak Persian. I've never been there. Are we seeing signs of fractures within the elite as they begin to fight with each other about the succession? And as far as I understand, we have not yet seen that. And that's but that is the that's the single most important thing to look for.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah. So, so so that that is the that's the marker. Keep your eyes on. Stay tuned.

Mike Doran: And on that two markers. I think that that one, by the way. Have you have you seen any signs or anyone say, of fissures in the regime?

Joel Rayburn: Well, I think you've been seeing those all along, because to my mind, the purges of many people after the Green Revolution in 2009, that was a purge of regime elites and it was a purge of the Rafsanjani faction. And then Ahmedinejad and his faction who were right in the middle of the regime power structure, they were purged as well. So I think you have seen those fractures over time. So there's still there's still a 2009 kind of Rafsanjani, Rafsanjani constituency out there. There's still an amended Nejad and an amended Nejad constituency, and they've been shunted to the side, but they're not gone. So. So yeah, I have seen those kind of tensions all along. So what we're really saying is, are there tensions in what has been consolidated.

Mike Doran: Consolidated.

Joel Rayburn: With other. And that. I don't know that I don't know.

Mike Doran: I was going to say two markers. One marker is the fractures within the regime. The second marker, I think, are larger protests. I mean, the protests that we've seen have been amazing. The the the. The courage of the people and and the willingness of them to go head to head with the security forces without unarmed is is amazing. But we're not seeing the kind of huge demonstrations that that we saw at the time of the revolution, for example. I mean, that could change quickly, but it might go the other direction as well.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, Well, I mean, the thing that in addition to protests, it looks to me like the the thing that the Iranian regime probably could not survive and I don't think they can thwart is a nationwide strike.

Mike Doran: That's that's the that's the third thing to look for, actually, is also some kind of leadership, clear leadership, whether inside the country or outside the country. We don't we don't have any sign of that at all.

Joel Rayburn: Shifting gears one more time, because some of these there are a couple of other topics I want to get your thoughts on. And then we have we're going to take some questions from from some folks in the audience. We have US elections coming up in just a few days. And it's I mean, I'm not a pollster. It looks like there are there's a high possibility of a change of control of one or both houses of Congress. What would that mean for US policy in the Middle East if that happens?

Mike Doran: I think the number one the single most important thing is that the JCPOA is dead. I think that this is a this is a this is a zombie policy. The everyone sees now when they when the Biden administration officials come out and they and they repeat the mantras of the policy that we think the diplomacy is the best way to solve it. We think that everything is gets worse if Iran gets a bomb and and so on. None of these things are seem to be related to what people can see with their own eyes on the ground, on the ground right now and the defensiveness of the administration about the protests. Why is it that they are still basically funneling money to the regime? And I say that because they are not enforcing sanctions on oil sales to China. Why are they? Why are they? Why are they?

Joel Rayburn: There's already de facto sanctions relief in lax enforcement of US sanctions. I mean, the contrast in the late Trump not to interrupt you too long here, but in the late Trump administration, the level of Iranian regime oil exports, it was down below 400,000 barrels a day and sometimes down around 250,000 barrels. And that's a regime. The revenues are so weak that the regime's is not sustainable for the regime. Now they're up over a million barrels a day that they're able to sell essentially illicitly, essentially in defiance of US sanctions. So, I mean, that they've already gotten sanctions relief.

Mike Doran: They've gotten and the the administration people can see that. And the average the average news reader can see that there's a there's a gap, a very big gap between the rhetoric of the administration when it talks about its policy and what its actual policy is. And I don't think that a gap that big can go on much longer. And they're going to now we're going to have opposition in Congress. We're going to have even if it's only one house, we're going to have the ability to have hearings, hold hearings on this, and shine a spotlight on the real decisions that are being made. And I just don't think the American public is going to support it.

Joel Rayburn: Well, in addition to that, something I want to know is so so so your assessment is if Congress changes hands, that it seems likely to do that. That's the end for the US end of the JCPOA. It seemed like the Iranian end of the JCPOA was already dead. Yeah, but the other part, the other party really in the JCPOA, essentially the Europeans, the major European countries. And what it looks to me like the Iranian regime's intervention into the Ukraine conflict is changing European attitudes about the Iranian regime in a really significant way. So it's almost as though the prospects for the JCPOA are be killed off in Ukraine. Yes.

Mike Doran: Yes. Yeah, I totally agree with that. Now, over the weekend, we had a protest in Berlin where 100,000 people were reported. I don't know if it was actually hundred thousand people, but the picture showed an enormous.

Joel Rayburn: Number of people, at least 80,000.

Mike Doran: And that's that's got to that's got to have an impact on because Germany is. Germany historically has really sought rapprochement with the regime, and that's going to be harder to sell in Germany. It's harder to sell in Germany. Can't sell.

Joel Rayburn: It anywhere. Well, but it's not just that it's harder to sell. It's that there are political parties in in Germany that are switching their positions and want to the Green Party, introduce legislation to sanction the Iranian regime. So when you get down to that point, it seems like even even on the European side, the constituency for the JCPOA is.

Mike Doran: Just but then fizzling. Then the problem is the the I believe that the the Biden administration probably knows that this is a dead policy, but they can't announce that because if they announce it, then the question comes what next? And there are two things that are in particular that are troubling to them. One, they don't want to cut off the oil supplies to China because they don't want to do anything that is going to reduce the global supply of oil at this particular moment. And and more importantly, they propagandized their own base. For years, that conflict with Iran was caused by faulty policy making in Washington, and that if we just had the right outreach to Iran, all not just the nuclear question, but all of the conflicts in which Iran is involved, whether it's with the Houthis or the or Lebanese Hezbollah or the militias in Iraq, that we can de-escalate all of that and stabilize the Middle East through this outreach to Iran. So now they have to turn around and basically say Donald Trump and Joel RAEBURN were right. And that that's that's extremely hard. I mean I mean, it's hard just on a human level to turn around and say everything I believed was wrong. But on a political level, it's even harder because the progressives, which is the most dynamic element in the in the party, truly believes all this nonsense. And so the it means that Biden has to go to war with his progressive base over this. He doesn't want to do it.

Joel Rayburn: Well, speaking.

Mike Doran: Of oh, sorry. Yeah, there's one other issue. It means also escalation of military. It's three issues. It's the oil, the going to war with the progressive base. And the third thing is military escalation in the Middle East.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, well.

Mike Doran: In some ways, that's the most serious thing. Because with a war in in in Ukraine, your war in Europe and potential war in Taiwan, the last thing the military wants to do is have a military buildup in the Middle East.

Joel Rayburn: Well, speaking of speaking of kind of tensions between a Biden administration and the progressive wing, not just of the party, but but beyond it, it seems like this is the there's there's a fight there over the US attitude and policy towards Saudi Arabia. So, I mean, you you have you have an extraordinary situation where at first because of the horrible events about surrounding the killing of Jamal Khashoggi but

now over and the the accusation that Saudi Arabia refused to live up to its end of the bargain in a relationship, the relationship, I guess, with the United States to increase oil prices or increase oil production so as to ease US energy costs, energy prices, that that Now what needs to happen is the United States, those who are making these. Assertions. Want the United States essentially to treat Saudi Arabia as an adversary or as a pro.

Mike Doran: Pro-iran wing, if I can call it that, the pro-Iran wing of the Democratic Party, or let me be nicer to them, because they won't. They'll say I'm not pro Iran. So that the the the the pro JCPOA wing of the Democratic Party, they have always been hostile to Saudi Arabia. That is part of the part of the policy of of of outreach to Iran is denigration of Saudi Arabia. So the idea that the idea that we have a tense relationship with Saudi Arabia because of the Opec+ decision or because of the killing of Khashoggi.

Joel Rayburn: And or the war in Yemen or.

Mike Doran: The war. Yeah, that's not it. There's a there's a strategic brain above all that. And there's a a decision has been made to. To to highlight those issues and to tarnish Saudi Arabia on the basis of those issues. I mean, the whole the whole you mentioned Yemen, the whole notion that this is the worst humanitarian, the worst humanitarian disaster in the world and it's Saudi Arabia's fault. Both of those are false. The worst humanitarian disaster in the world was in Syria, and it was almost a direct and and it was a direct consequence of the outreach to Iran and Russia and giving Iran and Russia a free hand to completely annihilate, obliterate Syrian cities. And look, oh, those guys did that in Iran and Russia did it in Syria. Now they're doing it in the now they're doing it in Ukraine. Suddenly we wake up and think, oh gosh, those Russians and Iranians really are a problem. But but, but we don't go back or when I say we, I mean the pro JCPOA wing of the party doesn't go back and say, hey, maybe I should rethink some of those beliefs I had about the about the Middle East four or five years ago.

Joel Rayburn: Well, in addition to that, I mean, just recently. So the Biden administration, in its first couple of weeks in office lifted sanctions on the Houthis.

Mike Doran: Right.

Joel Rayburn: And the Houthis now, most recently, the Houthis never stopped threatening shipping in the Red Sea and around the Babil, Mandeb, which essentially was asserting the ability to militarily control the Mandeb. But then just in the last few days, the Houthi military leaders announced that they're considering these strategic waterways, a joint operations area, meaning watch out, Will, and actually carried out an attack against the vessel out there the other day. And so you have and you have a situation where the. The Yemen war as the only focus on the Yemen war for several years and not just on the left, but on some on the far on the right as well, was that the Saudis were were the Saudis were out of control and driving a humanitarian catastrophe at the same time that the Houthis were becoming more and more and Iran, an arm of the IRGC and were threatening international shipping, as well as firing ballistic missiles off at airports and at a G20 capital, Riyadh.

Mike Doran: So let me let me add two points to that. I'm, of course, in total agreement with you.

Joel Rayburn: But but let me complete the thought for us, which is that Saudi Arabia has been watching the United States has been watching Washington react in an incoherent way to the conflict in Yemen. For several years for what? Really? Since 2009, but certainly since 2015. And and and and and so it's it's I think it's puzzling to Saudis and those who are watching this. What does the United States understand.

Mike Doran: So about this conflict? Let me let me let me repeat everything you said and just a different words that. If the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is based on oil for security, meaning not that we get oil from Saudi Arabia directly, but Saudi Arabia helps us with the global energy markets and make sure that their oil, which is the most significant, one of the most top three producers in the world, between us in the right way, together with us. I think it's.

Joel Rayburn: True. I think if you just stick a straw in the sand in Saudi Arabia, then oil. Yeah, light sweet crude.

Mike Doran: And they and so they help us manage the global energy market. And then we they get security, but we reneged on that. That's if that's the essence of the

relationship. We reneged on it. We're not we're no longer we're we're no longer delivering. And here's you mentioned ballistic missiles and. At airports in the G 20 capital meeting. We had a couple of interesting little factoids. On January 24th of this year, the Houthis launched a ballistic missile attack on Americans in UAE. And it was it was on. They did it on the 17th of January. And then on the 24th, on the 24th, though, they targeted the air base in UAE, where we have a where we have an air contingent. So they're attacking Americans at the same time, on the same day on the 24th, they also attacked Saudi Arabia. And Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, he met with the with the Emirati and Saudi ambassador and decried the terrorism of the Houthis against Saudi Arabia and and the UAE criticized it and said, we will work with our partners to have to prevent this or. But it's like Iran, in my view. Iran attacked the United States on January 24th, and the United States defined it as a terror attack against the UAE in.

Joel Rayburn: The same way that the United States has been defining Iranian attacks against American interests in Erbil.

Mike Doran: I guess. But if you're if you're I'm sorry, just if you're a if you're a Saudi or an Emirati and you see the Americans, look, in the year before 2021, there were hundreds I'm not sure if it was I mean, it was over 200. I could be wrong on the on the numbers cross border attacks, missiles and drones into into into Saudi Arabia. Nine states didn't say a word. Right. So we're not we're not helping them. We're not helping them deter Iran in that way. But then Iran attacks the United States and we still don't deter Iran. So if you're the Saudis and the Emiratis, you see Americans are being directly targeted and they refuse to deter Iran. Are they going to deter Iran? For me, no way.

Joel Rayburn: Well, it's like that scene in the Steve Martin movie *The Jerk*, where when he's a gas station attendant, a sniper is trying to shoot Steve Martin and he's hitting oil cans instead. And Steve Martin yells out, stay away from the oil cans. He he's trying to shoot the oil cans. He must hate the oil cans.

Mike Doran: That's that's exactly what our policy is.

Joel Rayburn: On on that note, why don't I. Because that's I mean, where can you go from that?

Mike Doran: Steve Martin.

Joel Rayburn: We have some questions. We have some questions that came in from our some of our friends in the region, some of whom are in our organization. Some of them are friends of our organization.

Mike Doran: And many questions from enemies.

Joel Rayburn: None, none on this list. None on this list. Some of these some of these. I think you've you've. Address already, but a little more about President Erdogan. So this is from Dr. Kemal Labadie, who whom you know, and who's also he is a senior non-resident fellow with with our organization. He says, Dr. Duran, do you think that President Erdogan has chosen to side in the alliance with Iran, Russia and China and turned his back on native. And that the issue of his exit is only a matter of timing.

Mike Doran: No, I don't. First of all, I never I never count out President Erdogan. I met President Erdogan about a year and a half ago. At a moment when? When? Prime Minister Netanyahu was in trouble. And he President Erdogan asked me, do you think that he'll survive? And I said, Mr. President, there are two politicians in this part of the world I never count out. And that's you and and and Prime Minister Netanyahu. And I. I think it's a mistake. I think the critics of Erdogan make a mistake. They keep in their minds just like they keep moving to the post, Erdogan and Erdogan, period. I think we should make politics about toward the post Erdogan period when the post Erdogan period comes for the moment. I think we should assume that we're in the Erdogan era. I don't I don't see the. I don't see opposition yet in Turkey that's capable of defeating him in an election. It may yet happen. We'll see. With respect to Russia and Iran, I don't think that I don't think we're seeing him align. Turkey is a great as our friend Rich Eisen says, it's a it's a big balancing machine given where it is geographically poised between the the Balkans, the South caucuses and the Middle East.

Mike Doran: I mean, historically very, very difficult places sitting opposite Russia. It it's always going to be doing a straddle. It always has. Under every Turkish leader and it

always will. I think that our job when I say our the United States job is to is to create a structure that allows it that pulls Turkey closer to us. I think our policy is doing to Turkey. The same thing that our policy is doing to Saudi Arabia. We have the goal of American foreign policy should be to create an overarching structure in the region that makes it easy for our traditional allies, especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, to solve their security dilemmas within our system. When you have what we were talking about with the with the Houthis, that we're not we're not providing the Saudis with a solution to the Houthi problem. We're just blaming them for it. Right. And when clearly they are not the Iranians are the ones who are responsible. We're not offering a solution. And with regard to the Turks, their number one problem in Syria is the PKK. And we are not creating a structure that makes it easy for them to solve their problems. That's where I think we need to focus.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, I think so. I spent a lot of time on that issue.

Mike Doran: I know you don't agree with you. Totally.

Joel Rayburn: Well, I don't know. I don't totally agree. I think there's a lot of nuance there. But what I will say is. What I think the United States has done far too little to try to help resolve. The 40 year Turkey PKK conflict, which is a cancer. At a metastasizing cancer in the heart of this region that we're talking about, this this Levant, this region around the Levant, it is an unaddressed cancerous tumor, which has huge stakes for the future of that region, the security of that region. And I've been disappointed over and over again, I made this observation in government. And now if we spent just a fraction of the diplomatic bandwidth and decision making energy on the Turkey PKK conflict, as we do on the Israeli-Palestinian issue or the Israel Lebanon maritime thing, et cetera. We would be, I think, in a completely different place, and so would so would Turkey.

Mike Doran: But I.

Joel Rayburn: Absolutely neglected.

Mike Doran: I start from a different place. Let me see if I can get you to agree with this statement that I'm going to make. And then we can we can we don't have to go deeply into this, but I think the principle of the United States should be we have a sense that we

always want to go solve problems. But I don't want to solve problems. I want to I want to make sure that the United States and its allies are top dog. And if we can solve the problem and. Make our allies top dog. That's great. Right. But the first goal is to be top dog. So I would say. A principle of US policy should be that any solution in Syria that we're looking for should be built with the Turks.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, sure. But I mean, even beyond.

Mike Doran: That's the first step. First step. The first. If we have an idea about Syria, the first step is go to Ankara, talk to Erdogan. That's. That's step number one.

Joel Rayburn: Beyond that, I want to see the turkey PKK conflict end. And that's that's important for Syria. It's huge for Iraq, for Iran and for Turkey's internal health as well. I want to see an end to that conflict for for for the interests of a lot of our allies. Turkey, first and foremost. Another question, this one from Dr. Samir Taki, who is also a senior non-resident fellow with the American Center for Law Studies. Another great man. And he says Hamas is banking on the upheaval of the Palestinian Authority after Abbas, after Abu Mazen. And if that were to happen, this would allow Iran a considerable opening to become a significant player again on the Middle Eastern stage via the Palestinian issue and the West Bank. And they're hoping that they can somehow browbeat, maneuver Israel into just having to accept or in others having to accept an Iranian role in the Palestinian territories. I mean, in the West Bank in particular via Hamas. What? Is the US cognizant this is the US doing anything to prevent this scenario? What should the US do to try to prevent this scenario?

Mike Doran: It's hard for me to answer the question about how cognizant the US is. I would say this is a long this story has been.

Joel Rayburn: I don't think it's on the radar screen at all.

Mike Doran: I think it's been going on a long time. When I was in the White House, which is 2005 to 7, that was my understanding of what Hamas was up to then. They were trying. Hamas was trying to take over the PLO because they wanted to be the they wanted to be the.

Joel Rayburn: Plo or the PA.

Mike Doran: The PLO. They wanted to take out they wanted to take over the PA eventually, but they wanted to they wanted to be they wanted to become part of the PLO and to take over the PLO, because that was a position of legitimacy within the intra Palestinian, within the inter-Palestinian. That's how I understood it. Now, I have not tracked it closely since, but I will say that that dimension of the conflict was not on the American radar because the whole issue the whole issue was a two state solution, negotiations between Abu Mazen. And back then, it was Olmert. And and that was the that was the focus. The minute you start the two state solution negotiations, you lock in whatever the institutional Let me put the United States in support of whatever the institutional status quo is on the on the Palestinian side.

Joel Rayburn: It looks to me almost like I mean, if you if you follow through Dr. Samir's logic and I think his question is coming is prompted by the return of Hamas leaders to Assad's Damascus, basically returning to the patronage of the Assad regime in Damascus just the other day. It's this is taking place alongside what has been the Israelis have had a significant impact on the Iranians military infrastructure in Syria and in recent months. This is kind of coming to fruition. They're really getting to the point where they're thwarting what was causing Suleimani's vision of turning Syria into an Iranian military outpost. And it's almost as though if the Iranian regime and Assad can bring Hamas back into their orbit and then help push Hamas into the West Bank, especially at a time where succession to Abu Mazen is is probably imminent and and completely up in the air.

Mike Doran: I don't believe that Abu Mazen will ever leave. No, no.

Joel Rayburn: No. That he'll he'll.

Mike Doran: I think I think.

Joel Rayburn: As long as all does. So he can go to 969 years.

Mike Doran: Every problem when I was in when I was in the White House, he had to resign about every two weeks. Yeah, it never happened. I don't believe we'll ever have.

Joel Rayburn: So. So his life expectancy, you're saying he's got another? I mean, it's like a Toyota engine. It can go up to 300,000 miles.

Mike Doran: It's like the ever ready.

Joel Rayburn: The Energizer bunny.

Mike Doran: Yeah, that's advantage.

Joel Rayburn: All right. But I mean, it looks like it looks like via Hamas, almost like what the Iranian regime and Assad are trying to do is to be able to outflank the Israeli military totally politically down.

Mike Doran: Totally. I totally agree. I totally agree with that analysis. I have no idea if anyone in the White House is thinking about it. I suspect that they aren't. But but we should definitely. And and do I have a good idea about what to do about it? No, because the problem is the problem is that the sclerotic leadership in the in the PA. And what do you do about that.

Joel Rayburn: Well, in addition but in addition, I mean, this is something about and we should maybe do we should do a video talk about this sometime. Is that in the White House, No. One, the most brilliant people in the White House don't have time to think about anything. You. You have no bandwidth.

Mike Doran: Oh, you're saying just because you're busy all the time. The phone is always ringing.

Joel Rayburn: The tempo when you're in the White House, when you're in the NSC, no matter what the administration is, no matter you can be Henry Kissinger. You just don't have your bandwidth to sort of sit and contemplate and strategize.

Mike Doran: That takes us back to the.

Joel Rayburn: Almost.

Mike Doran: Nil that takes us back to the to the mission of of the of the center. Because the it is true, I think Henry Kissinger has a I mean, of course, Henry Kissinger, like Abraham Lincoln, has the same for everything. But he has a saying that you basically you don't you don't develop any big strategic ideas in in in power. You take whatever capital you have is what you when you before you get into strategic intellectual capital, you have right before you come into office is.

Joel Rayburn: What you have. Because when you're in the White House or you're in the state in an operational role, you're expending political capital. I give you that accumulating.

Mike Doran: I'll give you a I'll give you one little example of that. It was amazing to me to see during. During the Second Lebanon War 2006, Israelis and Hezbollah. There came this moment toward the end of the war where you had in the room, I mean, virtual room. You had Nabih Berri. Kofi Annan, the United States. Nabih Berri as the stand in for Hezbollah. Right. Kofi Annan, the United States, maybe the EU or whatever. And as you're.

Joel Rayburn: Moving and not be very at that time was a much younger man. I think he was only he was in he was only as early seventies.

Mike Doran: As like I tell you, I don't don't count on them ever leaving the. The. I remember I was concerned. I think the Israelis missed a lot of opportunities in that war and they didn't play their hand very well. But it was our job to see to it that they come out in a better position after the war then than before, because they're our ally. And I remember talking with a with a senior colleague, someone senior to me who was talking to me about the importance of what Kofi Annan had to say. And my attitude toward Kofi Annan was like Stalin's attitude toward the pope. You know, how many divisions does Kofi Annan have? Why why why is Kofi Annan's view of any of this matter at all? But if you don't have a if you don't have a strategic sense of what outcome you want, then then you get caught up in the flow of events and there's a lot of pressure and all of a sudden Kofi Annan actually matters and Nabih Berri matters. His attitude or the position he's taking.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, we should, right? If you're a superpower, you should at least show up to the game with a game plan of your own.

Mike Doran: Yeah, you should know what you want.

Joel Rayburn: Not winging it. Last question from our friends. And this is from several who are in our team. What would you advise? Given everything we've talked about, what would you advise Arab political experts to do so as to inform a better strategy for the region? What should they do?

Mike Doran: I think. I'm not saying that because we're here for for the center. I think one of the things that we're trying to we're trying to bridge here this incredible gap, because you talk to people in the Middle East about what's going on in the Middle East and then you talk to people in Washington, even inform people about what's going on in the Middle East. And the gaps between the two conversations are just enormous. And I think I think step number one Step number one is that we start having a joint conversation, that we bring these conversations together, that we're always going to have this problem. That that I started with my. When we when we first started talking here. I think we have to admit to ourselves upfront that the United States is never going to have a Syria policy. No, I'm. Pardon me. Pardon me.

Joel Rayburn: I well, we did have one.

Mike Doran: No, wait. I know.

Joel Rayburn: But only for a few months.

Mike Doran: No, but but what I mean to say is that. We're four years. I tried to I tried to convince people that the that the the new order in the Middle East was being forged in Syria. And therefore, we had to it had to be a focus of our attention. Right. And you you just run up against the reality that there are sort of deep historical reasons why this why Syria is an afterthought to to to Americans. So I think it was a I think it's a bit of a mistake to try to convince them to sort of reorient. I mean, look, we got we got I say we, the United States, suddenly focused on Iraq and look at all the blood and treasure that was. And how much of your life was spent was spent on Iraq. And then suddenly the

United States is not thinking about Iraq anymore. I mean, the speed with which it dropped off the headlines is it is shocking. It's shocking, isn't it? Yeah, but that's because this is there's an historical reason.

Joel Rayburn: And then and then Washington's understanding of the dynamics in Iraq were frozen in amber.

Mike Doran: Yeah, everybody was everybody was a everybody was an Iraq expert for about for about a year and a half, two years. And then and then no more.

Joel Rayburn: Right.

Mike Doran: But like you said, with the. Well, so.

Joel Rayburn: Afghanistan.

Mike Doran: Another one. Yeah. So we have to understand that these parts of the world where the United States historically has not had had. Our interests. There are are the interests of great power, a great power's interest. But there are no parochial American interests in Syria. We don't have any industries. We don't have any four star. They don't make microchips. They don't have oil. They don't. There's nothing that ties us directly. So we have to start with an awareness that that is always going to be a problem. Always. And we have to work to we have to work to connect the discussion in Syria to the areas where we do. Where there is going to be more sustained focus.

Joel Rayburn: On, well, what you do when when, when you don't just sit in Washington, when you have relationships and engagements and discuss in detailed discussions, in exchanges with people in the region and in your allied country, among your allies, then you you you realize that when we're talking to our Turkish allies, what are they concerned about? They're concerned about Syria. They're concerned about Iraq. It's right there for them. The Israelis are fighting a war in Syria. When you go to talk to your our Saudi partners. What's on their radar screen. Iraq, Syria. I mean, these places, these are front and center. So, yeah, we again, we're so we're back to the issue of we're an ocean away, but our allies are not Our allies are are our allies are right there. And it's it's not just the other countries. It's not just our allies in the Middle East.

Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad almost destroyed the European Union by. Purposefully as part of a purposeful, purposeful strategy, displacing millions of Syrians so as to flood the European countries with refugees. We believe they can.

Mike Doran: And we blame Erdogan for that.

Joel Rayburn: Right. So the thing is, the thing is that's still true. That is still a card that Bashar al-Assad has to play and Vladimir Putin has to play. So it's like they have a dagger. Aimed right at the European Union and the European Union almost folded with 1 million Syrian refugees.

Mike Doran: We can also make we can also make the the the propaganda. There's a there's an Iranian Russian, Syrian propaganda complex. Yeah. And they are they they they are much more sophisticated at propaganda than we are. You know, they they tie in through the through the Syrian and Lebanese Christian groups. They come over here and they flood the hill and they have Armenians as well are part of that. And they pull a lot of domestic American attitudes in the direction of Russia and Iran. We can do a better job about highlighting that as well.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, So I think so to to bring us full circle. I think these things, these are ways in which we need an effort like what we're trying to launch here to try to improve the understanding. But the both the official understanding and the public understanding of what is happening in that region, what are the stakes, what is what, and then what should be a logical, reasonable United States response to those? What are our allies concerned about? What's on the priority list for our allies? I think many times and I experienced this as a diplomat, when you show up in a capital and you have your priority list for planning for Foggy Bottom and you realize that the the top five things on your agenda are not anywhere near the top of your of your allies and your ally wants to talk about a set of issues is completely off of your talking points and and you get then you get out of the line. I'm not saying I'm not saying that we would fix that. I'm not saying would repair that, but at least you should close. You should try to close the gap in understanding and situational awareness.

Mike Doran: But part of part of that is and this is maybe a better way of what I don't think I said before very well what I was trying to say. We we had a discussion at a

certain point here about you and I. About the, for lack of a better word, the neo isolationism. Let's just drop the drawbridge and stay behind our mode. And you and I don't believe that's going to work.

Joel Rayburn: Right.

Mike Doran: But we have to admit, you and I, that we're not going to have another George W Bush style invasion of Iraq in the Middle East. The American public does not want a large scale military intervention in the Middle East. It's not going to happen. So we the this counterterrorism, this counterterrorism approach, it trumped a geopolitical any kind of geopolitical understanding, because we had we we had such a powerful position in the region. We don't have that anymore. So if we're going to look after our interests, we have to do it in alliance with our with our partners. Right. So and the key ones, again, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt, somebody is trying to talk to us. So part of our job is to is to is to create a a a a coherent strategy that is doable. If we have the right strategy, then those agendas and the agendas and Ankara and the agendas in Riyadh will automatically be a lot closer.

Joel Rayburn: Well, I'd say so. There's a there's a there's a saying in the Bible scriptures that fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of wisdom in geopolitics or foreign policy. National security, I think, is being able to discern between your friends and your enemies and and then operate accordingly. So that's that's that's a job win. And I think right now, Rand. Iran. Not a friend, not a friend.

Mike Doran: Enemy Iran. Not even a potential friend.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, I think I think it's safe to say that we're in a conflict with the with the Iranian regime. But you have to recognize that if you don't if you don't recognize that or acknowledge that you're in a conflict with your enemies, then then your policy is going to go astray and your relationship with the allies is going to go astray. Well, I think that's we.

Mike Doran: We solved all the.

Joel Rayburn: We did we solved them all this.

Mike Doran: Close up the center because we just.

Joel Rayburn: It's done the mission. The mission is accomplished. Now. The mission is just the mission is starting. I think this is a good this was a good discussion to highlight the issues surrounding why we need to have an effort like this, why we need to take expert voices from the region. To get their assessment of of things of the region that they're living in. See things as they as they see it. Help that help amplify their work and their voices to better inform understanding and decision making, hopefully here here in the United States and then also and then to reflect back to. To go back and to try to explain to our friends in in in the Middle East what the heck is happening in Washington? Why? Why is the United States doing X, Y, or Z? Because. Because it doesn't make any sense. How many times have you heard that from our from our friends in the region? So. So what? And most of the time, it doesn't make sense. But we can we can at least try to try to explain.

Mike Doran: What.

Joel Rayburn: Where it's coming from, why we wind up with an approach that that doesn't seem to make sense. So I want to thank you, Mike Durant. Thank you. Thank you for being a part of this initiative. Thank you for spending time today. For for the audience out there, we will be. The American Center for Levant Studies. You can check us out at American Center dot org. You can check us out on our social media platforms, on Facebook, also on Twitter. Our handle is at Levant Studies and we'll be bringing this kind of discussion to you. We'll be we'll be amplifying voices from from the Middle East and getting them into the Washington, DC and the English speaking audience and then and and vice versa. So we look forward to that. And thank you for joining us for today. And we will see you again soon.

Mike Doran: Sure. Well.